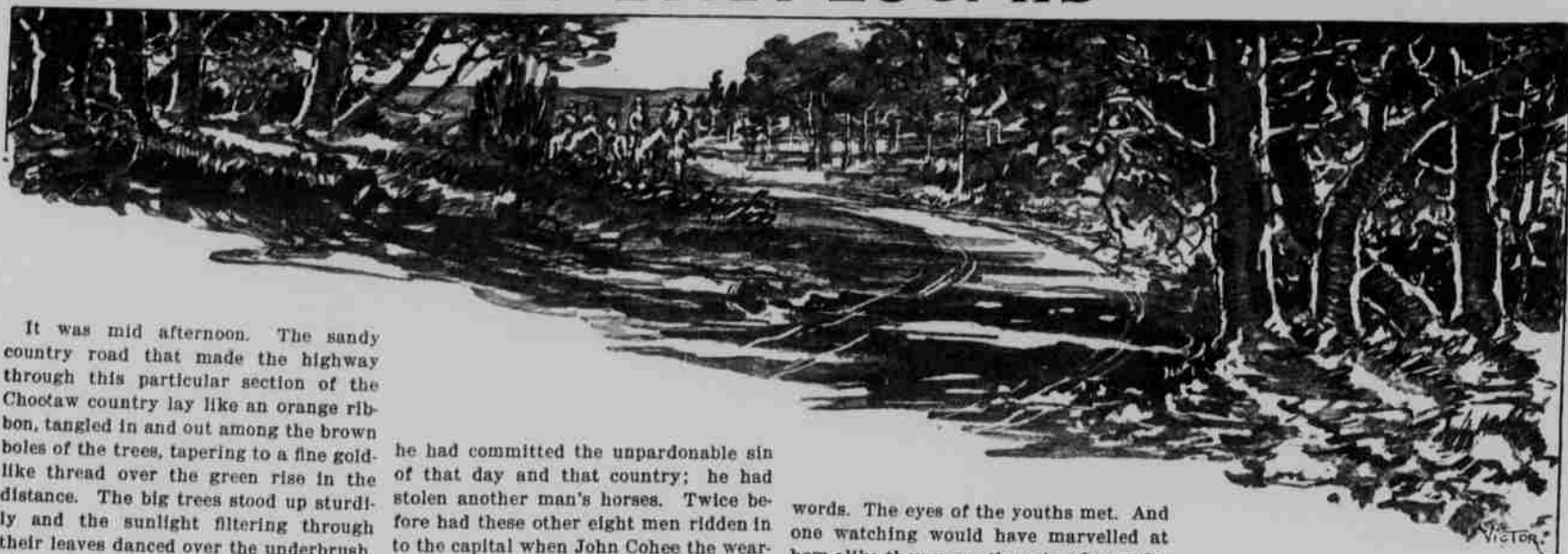


THE CHOCTAW TRUTH OATH

BY LUCIA LOOMIS



It was mid afternoon. The sandy country road that made the highway through this particular section of the Choctaw country lay like an orange ribbon, tangled in and out among the brown boles of the trees, tapering to a fine gold-like thread over the green rise in the distance. The big trees stood up sturdily and the sunlight filtering through their leaves danced over the underbrush, like golden fairies in the maze of some mystic dance. It was very still and except for the far off baying of a hound or the occasional piping of a woodland bird, the only sound was the mysterious murmur of the trees as their tops sway- ed ever so lightly in the upper air. The hurried scurrings of the little live things in the shrubberies and the monotonous tapping of an industrious woodpecker but merged themselves in the general murmur that was never still but gave the effect of a vast silence.

But soon a sound came faintly through the distance, the muffled pad of horses' feet on the sand of the highway, and before long over the wooded mound a party of Indian men came riding gravely, frightening the woodpecker into a short silence. The men rode, two by two, and while they seemed to be at home in the saddle, there was no enthusiasm in their bearing. Those who headed the cavalcade were elderly men, with rounded paunches and fat, sagging cheeks. They spoke to each other but seldom, and then only in their own language and in sentences as short as the Choctaw tongue permitted. They answered each other with grunts and nods. Behind them were five other men, four of them going two by two, with a stalwart young man in the center of the road, riding with no companion by his side. Each of these men were in the habit of speaking to each other in English, except in a crisis like this and then they invariably reverted to their own tongue, seeming to derive strength and consolation from its guttural, interrogatory syllables.

The event of today was one which did not happen frequently, especially in their particular part of the nation, and the day was fraught with much meaning for each of the riders. For in their center there rode a young man, with a green leaf pinned over his heart. And the green leaf, token of spring and gladness and life, was to the Choctaw the symbol of death. The men were returning from the council house of the capital, and there but a short time before the wearer of the green leaf had been condemned to death by the tribal council. For a third time

he had committed the unpardonable sin of that day and that country; he had stolen another man's horses. Twice before had these other eight men ridden in to the capital when John Cohee the wearer of the green leaf, had been stripped and whipped for the grave offense, but at the third breaking of the law, each knew there was no reprieve. The crime must be condoned by death. There was no other way to pay. They had heard the sentence passed and had seen the leaf pinned to young Cohee's bosom; Each knew that in one month from that day the condemned man was to ride back to the council house and with the leaf over his heart stand up bravely and like a Choctaw, for the bullet which was to take his life. In the meantime, he could come and go and do as he pleased, free as any other Indian who roamed the woods or sat before his door in the summer gloaming.

The horses had fallen into a monotonous jog, and the men were silent, the condemned man sitting straight in his saddle with his eyes fixed on the deep wheel rut beneath him, which slid by with fascinating twists. On his face there was less of concern than had fixed itself upon the countenances of the others. His eyes did not hold the somber light that gloomed in those of his companions.

Then, at once and startling close there sounded a shot upon the air, which shattered the silence of the wood, like the crash of breaking glass. The piebald Indian ponies did not quiver, but the head of each man turned in the direction of the sound. Presently, as if to reward their curiosity, there came breaking through the tangled creepers a tall young Choctaw with a gun across his shoulder and a wild turkey hanging limp across his arm, a magnificent black and bronze bird with blood still dripping from a wound in the head. At sight of the men on the horses, the hunter stopped and his eyes flew to the face of one of the men in the front, Temple James, his father, as if to ask the question which his lips failed to form. The father's eyes softened as he looked upon his son, but he gave him no word of greeting.

The hunter's eyes traveled slowly from his father's face and fell upon that other young man and the green leaf on his breast told the story better than any

words. The eyes of the youths met. And one watching would have marvelled at how alike they were, those two boys who regarded each other so gravely. There was the same straight frame taller than the average Choctaw, the same brown tinted face, with the long lines of health and youth, and lacking the sagging flesh which gave the older men the look of grossness. The same open brow, and firmly curved lips, and the same flashing black eyes. The two did not cease to look at one another until the rider had gone too far to see without turning his head. The hunter also kept his eyes on the condemned youth until the little party of horsemen had passed the turn in the road and were hidden from his sight.

Again it came to him, as it had so many times before how much like himself was the horse thief, John Cohee. The knowledge of this resemblance gave him an inward pang and angered him at the same time. But he did not dwell upon it this afternoon and after a very short pause, he crossed the road and struck off through the trees with the dead turkey dangling from his shoulder.

The elderly man riding in front by Temple James' side turned toward his companion, when they had left the young hunter behind, and made this enigmatic remark.

"If it were your son Lewis with the green leaf over his heart there would be no need for the Choctaws to fear for their honor."

Temple James said no word in reply, but the look on his face was the same as if he had acquiesced. Only the soft pad, pad, of the ponies' feet broke the silence. Minnie, stooping to fill her pail at the old spring by the side of the hill, saw stalwart young James come striding toward her out of the foliage of the trees, but she pretended to be gazing only into the cool, clear water when she heard his footsteps behind her on the stones. The green moss felt like softest velvet to her fingers, and she let her hand press it lingeringly as she drew up the dripping bucket. Then she turned and faced the intruder, without rising from her knees. As she saw him looking down at her she blushed, but her face went pale in a moment when she remembered how sad she was. Young James sat down on one of

the many rocks which made a natural protection for the walled-in spring, and when Minnie saw the act she, too, sat on a rock so that she might not seem lacking in courtesy. Then the two pair of dark eyes met.

The rounded lobe of the tall hill shut them off from view of Minnie's home which perched just on the other side of the rise which was densely covered with small trees and creepers. In the valley below them the cotton plants glistened olive in the sun and beyond the field another wooded rise lured with magnificent stretches of untilled wildness. The air was clear and filled with the wine distilled from the heart of growing things. A little stray breeze from the top of the hill stole down and flirted with the sun scorched rocks and the dust gray tangled grass, kissing the flushed cheeks of the girl and the youth as they looked into each other's faces. Without knowing they did so, both stood up.

Even in the excitement of the moment, however, when his arms were straining to hold her and his heart was beating so fast that he could hardly breathe, and his whole being was filled with the joy of her close presence, back in his inner consciousness there hammered the thought that Minnie was not glad and that her eyes held traces of tears.

But in the eternal exuberance of youth, young James thrust aside these things and remembered only the wonder of his love for the girl. "Minnie, Minnie," he said at last and his voice rang with the fervor of youth and love. "I am here. You know why. You see, I love you. You can read it in my eyes. My hands are shaking as the hand of a young Choctaw never shakes except when he struggles with love. Look into my face, little birdling and answer with yours eyes."

His hands reached out to clasp her and he had not the strength to draw them back so shaken was he, by the mighty surge of feeling which swept like a tide over his whole body, and made of his habitual calm a raging volcano of emotion. But even as his soul soared into the heights, and he would have tak-